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# A Window to Furman's Past

By Matthew Sohner '11



*Governor John Gardiner Richards (holding hat) attended the 1928 Furman-Clemson game at Manly Field (Clemson won, 27-12); W.L. "Billy" Laval, dubbed "The King," coached football from 1915-27.*

*Opposite: Students enjoy a match on the courts outside Geer Hall, 1930.*





**As a recorder and collector** of all things Greenville, few could match Bill Coxe.

Coxe, a prolific photographer, came to Greenville in 1920 and spent the next five decades taking and collecting photographs of the city. When he died in 1973, he left a visual history of more than 120,000 images dating from the late 1890s to the 1960s. Included in the collection were glass-plate images of Furman and the Greenville Woman's College, most of them from the 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1989 a member of the Coxe family contacted Furman's James B. Duke Library about donating the collection to the university's archives. Furman held the images until 1991, when the Greenville Historical Society took on responsibility for their preservation. The images were stored in several places, but remained undisturbed and uninvestigated.

About a decade ago, the historical society decided to reduce the size of the collection. When Steve Richardson, Furman's coordinator of reference services, and archivist J. Glen Clayton learned that images of the school might be disposed of, they quickly moved to reacquire and return them to the university archives.

Last spring, as part of Courtney Tollison's class on "Experiential Learning in Public History," I was an intern in the library's Department of Special Collections and Archives. I had the opportunity to scan, digitize and identify many of the Furman images from the Coxe Collection, and to create a guide to the photos.

From January to March I worked on the project three days a week, three to four hours a day. The individual images — some stained, some broken or dirty — were recorded as photographic negatives on 8x10-inch glass plates, which are extremely delicate and must be handled with the utmost care.

The process was painstakingly slow. The images had to be scanned at high resolution and saved as large, uncompressed files. But it was amazing to see how technology could convert the glass-plate negatives into beautiful, crystal-clear, black-and-white digital images. Using the yearbooks from the 1920s and 1930s, I worked to identify the student groups, faculty members, buildings, sports teams and campus events recorded on the images.

By the end of the internship I had scanned and identified 150 photographs — still less than half the collection. I developed a brochure and organized an exhibit of selected photos, and included a video describing their discovery, "rescue," and the work I did in cataloging the images.

My goal for the project was to introduce the Furman community to a piece of its collective history. In doing so, I worked with photographs of students who had long since died and who had attended college on campuses that no longer exist. The photos were taken at a time when photography was deliberate, and when society did not have camera phones or the ability to upload pictures instantly to the Internet for the whole world to see.

It led me to ask questions that I hope everyone who sees these images will consider: What value will my own photographs have to another generation in 50 or 100 years? And how will those images be archived and preserved? One day, someone may be peering at my face on a computer screen, yet may know as little about me as I do about the people in the Coxe Collection photographs. This thought reminds me of the importance of photographs not just as entertainment, but as visual records. [F]

*The author, who earned a degree in history, is working with AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) in Rock Hill, S.C., developing a children's literacy program.*





*This page:  
A triumphant finish on the dirt track;  
President William J. McGlothlin  
(front row, second from right),  
with faculty and staff in 1931.*

*Opposite:  
The late 1920s edition of the Furman  
band, ready for a halftime show;  
Greenville Woman's College's most  
valuable players, 1929–30; May Day  
1931, where a bird and a turtle  
exchanged pleasantries.*







To see all the Coxe Collection photos that have been digitized, visit <http://digicenter.furman.edu> and click the Luna Online Collection link. All photos courtesy Furman Department of Special Collections and Archives.

